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Power and the Tale: Coaching as Storyselling

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper proposes, discusses and evaluates a four-stage model of storyselling and its accompanying power dynamics, which are at the heart of coaching in organizations.

Design / methodology / approach: This paper is informed by a social constructionist view of coaching.

Findings: The conceptualisation of the coaching process as a series of storyselling activities highlights the power of storytelling to facilitate management development through coaching on the one hand and the potential for manipulation and abuse on the other.

Research implications: The application of storytelling in organizational coaching as well as the darker and manipulative side of storyselling in the coaching process and relationships should inform future research into these important phenomena.

Practical implications: An analysis of the complex nature of the dynamics of coaching and the multi-layered nature of the relationship between coach, organization and coachee will be of benefit to practising coaches, purchasers and recipients of coaching as well as researchers interested in coaching.

Originality / value: The value of this paper lies in the exploration of the relatively new concept of storyselling and accompanying power dynamics in an organizational coaching context.

Key words: Coaching, organization, power, sensemaking, storyselling, storytelling

Paper type: Conceptual paper

Power and the Tale: Coaching as Storyselling

Introduction

Coaching as both a developmental process and a profession is continuing to grow and gain popularity with organizations and budding coaches alike (Jarvis, 2004). This paper is written to challenge and explore the possible use and abuse of power within the complex relationship structure of coaching and offers some serious and challenging considerations for the purchaser, the provider and the recipient of coaching. The needs for coaching are endless and will vary from organization to organization and from individual to individual. However, despite the need for coaching as a management development tool, there is also the need to be aware of the possible pitfalls along the way.

Storytelling is becoming an attractive coaching tool to facilitate management development in both the public and private sector. It can indeed facilitate the coaching process (Reissner, 2009), yet more attention needs to be given to the often distorted nature of stories (Gabriel, 2004), their manipulative power (Gabriel, 2008) and their use as a means to deceive and seduce (Lapp and Carr, 2008). Coaches, client organizations, coachees and researchers interested in coaching need to be aware that stories are not neutral communication devices. They need to examine the roots of the stories of the coaching relationship, their prejudices and deceptions (Gabriel, 2004), to assess their veracity, authenticity and to identify any hidden power dynamics.

Inspired by Lapp and Carr's (2008) notion of 'storyselling' and drawing on Gabriel's (2000) argument that good stories convince, we conceptualise coaching in organizations as a process in which coach, organization and coachee sell their stories to one another and by doing so play out power dynamics. Each of these stakeholders will attempt to achieve their sometimes hidden agenda and may seek to persuade the others by means of manipulation. Storyselling at multiple levels is a central yet problematic part of the coaching process because of the fundamental yet attractive and seductive nature of storytelling in human interaction. We propose a four-stage model in which 1) the coach sells their services to the organization, 2) the organization convinces the coachee to participate, 3) the coachee engages critically with their stories, rewrites them and 4) disseminates them across the organization to bring about change there. In this process, multiple stories interact and inform one another in constructive or abusive ways.

Discussing the notion of ‘storyselling’ in the coaching context requires an exploration of the influence of power on the relationship between organization, coach and coachee. Organizations are perceived as institutions which perpetuate corporate and societal hegemony (Ogbor, 2001) and which are permeated by power. Power will therefore influence organizational activities and may be exerted through coercion or more subtle means of influence (Lukes, 2005); however, it does not necessarily reside with the position of the person exerting power (French and Raven, 1969). Given the complex nature of relationships within the coaching process (i.e. between coach, organization and coachee) multiple opportunities exist for the use and abuse of power. For instance, the coach may see themselves as an expert or this exalted status may be conferred upon them by their clients. Either way, the relationship is open to the influence of (perceived) power, which is an enduring aspect of human relationships (Linstead, 2004). Coaching as a management development tool makes it a target for the pursuit of self-interest and exploitation of others, even though this may not be the result of a clear and conscious agenda. These issues will be examined more closely in the main body of this paper.

This conceptual paper is structured as follows. The following section will review the literature on coaching, sensemaking, storytelling and power, drawing on the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Cunliffe, 2008). The main part of this paper will introduce the proposed four-stage model of storyselling in organizational coaching and critically evaluate the potential for use and abuse at each of the four stages through the power inherent within the relationships. The conclusion of this paper is that coaching involves the negotiation and maintenance of multi-layered relationships in which storytelling and storyselling are applied in the process of reflection and understanding as well as in seeking power and influence. It could be argued that coaching may reproduce organizational relationships, facilitates organizational learning and be possibly used as a strategy with which to achieve power. The latter is a possible outcome where a coach is being manipulated by the organization to achieve a particular outcome or where they abuse their position of (perceived) authority for the purpose of control and influence.

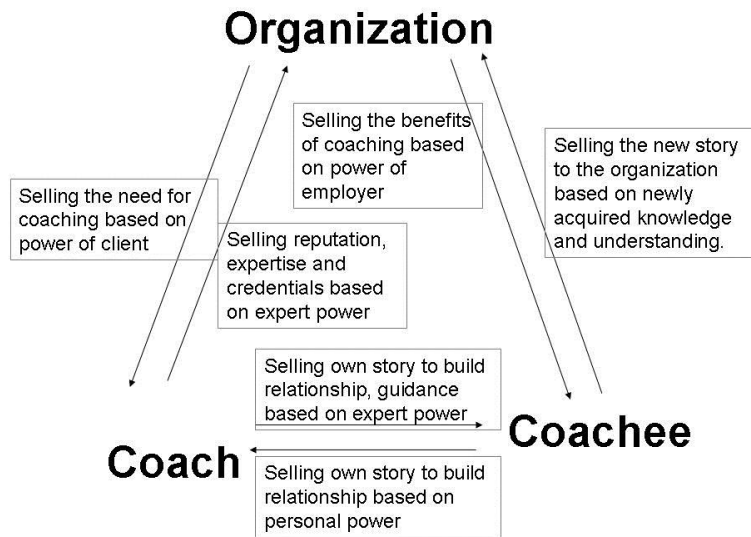
On Coaching, Storytelling and Storyselling

In line with social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Crotty, 1998; Cunliffe, 2008), we regard coaching as a transformational learning and sensemaking experience (Reissner, 2008a; du Toit, 2006; 2007) which is facilitated by the interaction between coach and coachee (Downey, 2003; Whitworth et al., 2007). It is an opportunity for the coachee to discover new meanings

with the guidance of the coach. In storytelling terms, coaching aims to enable the coachee to question, challenge and potentially rewrite their experiences which they have come to understand through one or more personal narratives (Reissner, 2008a) for their own and their organization's developmentⁱ. This conceptualization draws on adult learning theory (Gray, 2006), particularly experiential and transformational learning, and has little to do with teaching. Experiential learning is about making explicit everyday experiences so that the coachee can draw on them in the future (Boud et al., 1985; Kolb, 1984), while transformational learning is about changing the coachee's frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997). This view of coaching is therefore about cognitive, emotional and behavioural learning with potentially long-lasting implications on the coachee's perceptions and behaviours (Reissner, 2008a).

The interplay between experiential and transformative learning allows the coachee to examine their experiences as well as their frames of reference, and coaching supports the critical examination and adaptation of cognition, emotion and behaviour (Brockbank and McGill, 2006) through storytelling. Reflective and reflexive (i.e. self-referencing) practice is a key part of this process that provides increasing self-awareness and the opportunity to question and challenge behaviours and beliefs (Mezirow, 1997). In organizations, coaching is widely used to support such learning as part of management development with the aim to bring about change in both the coachee and the wider organization. There are three main power dynamics involved in this process: 1) the personal power of the coach to convince the organization about their expertise and to work with the coachee as part of the coaching assignment; 2) the power of the organization to sell the story of the need for coaching to both the coach and the coachee; 3) the coachee's power to sell their own story to both the coach and the organization. This relationship, is represented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Storyselling and power dynamics



Coaching involves making sense of past and present experience (Reissner, 2008a; du Toit, 2007) through observation, critical dialogue and reflection (Brockbank and McGill, 2006; Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1997), all of which will inform the coachee's future perceptions and behaviours; power dynamics are a key part of this (Gabriel, 2008). Sensemaking, or the creation of meaning, is an ongoing yet retrospective narrative activity, which is best summarised as: "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" (Weick, 1979, p. 5). It is a process through which various insights and ideas coalesce into something meaningful (Dougherty et al., 2000) and in which stories (or accounts of personal experience, Reissner, 2008b) act as carriers of meaning (Brown, 2000; Weick, 1995; 2001). This allows the storyteller to articulate not only what has happened to them, but also their fears, hopes and expectations for the future (Taylor et al., 2002) through the act of storytelling (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking therefore helps social actors to deal with equivocality (Huzzard, 2004), and this process may require them to disrupt taken-for-granted meanings, or as Pratt (2000) defines it, sensebreaking.

Sensemaking is both an individual and a collective process in which social actors create meaning through narrative interaction (Weick, 1979; 2001). This allows them to be influenced by the sense made of others and in turn shape and influence the meanings they make through the exchange of stories (Author 1). Sensemaking is about being the author and interpreter, creator as well as discoverer, and the context within which people make sense of their world has a strong influence on what is experienced as reality (Weick, 1995). This reality, however, may be heavily

influenced by the organization, its ideologies and language (Gabriel, 2008), and sensemaking is therefore about plausibility, creation and invention and not necessarily about accuracy or factual truth.

Hence, stories act as the vehicle through which social actors come to understand their world. The recounting and listening to stories has been instrumental in the evolution of mankind and a means through which learning and development has taken place for millennia (Allan et al., 2002; McAdams, 1997). It is also through storytelling that meaning is created and identities are established within human relationships (Weick, 2001). Through the collaborative process of storytelling in coaching prevailing assumptions and meanings as well as subtle power dynamics can be made explicit and critically assessed in an attempt to create new meanings. The collaborative nature of the relationship between the coach and client is established at the outset and the trust built up allows the coachee to explore within the safe coaching environment the potential power dynamics they may be exposed to within the organization. The creation of new meaning opens up opportunities for changes in behaviour in response to the power dynamics. Collectively social actors are able to negotiate, discuss and construct a reality that makes sense to them at a particular moment in time (Cunliffe et al., 2004). It is through stories that they are able to share the assumptions held about their world as well as their underpinning beliefs. Politicians, artists, philosophers and playwrights have successfully crafted stories throughout the centuries for the purpose of transferring knowledge, eliciting emotive feelings and persuading others (Grisham, 2006), and coaches can use stories to facilitate the coaching process in a similar fashion. However, they also need to be aware of the different ways in which power relationships may be played out in this process. They need to examine their own use of power, both explicit and implicit, in the coaching relationship as well as any power that may be exerted over them by coachee and organization.

Storytelling is at the heart of human communication (Bruner, 1986; 1990; 1991) as it allows storytellers to frame and reframe their experiences as well as to establish coherence (Linde, 1993) and temporal order (Czarniawska, 1997). Stories are therefore a key element in the coaching process through which coach and coachee communicate, interact and critically engage (Reissner, 2009) and which supports management development (Morgan and Dennehy, 1997). Storytelling is natural, innocent and often unacknowledged (McAdams, 1997), yet it can be used to exert power, manipulate, distort and abuse (Gabriel, 2004; Lapp and Carr, 2008), contributing to the complex social and power dynamics in organizations. Many stories are beyond the control of outside actors as sensemaking and storytelling are open-ended processes with endless

possibilities of interpretation (Reissner, 2008b). Nevertheless, sensemaking and storytelling are influenced –in constructive or abusive ways – by a multitude of other stories that exist in the social actor’s social and organizational environment; the dynamics behind this interaction of stories remain ill understood, however.

Drawing on Gabriel’s (2000) assertion that a good story will convince the audience, we argue that all storytelling in organizational coaching involves some degree of storyselling – a notion closely linked to power (Lapp and Carr, 2008). Even in everyday storytelling (a fundamental way of human communication, McAdams, 1997), the storyteller will have an agenda for telling their story (Gabriel, 2008), which may be to inform the listener, to share their experiences and give advice, to try and influence the listener’s perceptions, attitudes or behaviours, or to manipulate and seduce the audience. Whatever the intention of the story, power is often inherent in storytelling. Hence, we argue that by telling one’s story, the storyteller tries to sell it to the audience, either with an innocent or some other agenda in mind. A skilled narrator has the ability to manipulate others and leave them questioning their own truths. The challenge is to identify the agenda behind a story and to interpret it accordingly.

Storyselling in Coaching: Use and Abuse

Storytelling is a fundamental activity in organizations that is inextricably linked to power (Gabriel, 2008), which in the context of organizational coaching is a process of storyselling at multiple levels. The following four stages seem to be particularly important in most organizational coaching relationships (see Figure 2 below):

- 1) contracting stage, in which the coach will sell their services to the organization, convincing them of their approach, reputation and credentials while the organization will sell their need for coaching to the coach in search of the right appointment;
- 2) selection stage, in which the organization will sell the idea of coaching to the employee in question (coachee), convincing them of the need for or potential benefits of coaching. The coach may be asked to support this process by telling and selling their own story to the potential coachee;
- 3) coaching stage, in which coach and coachee interact and in which the coachee rewrites their story and sells it to themselves;
- 4) dissemination stage, in which this new story will be sold to other stakeholders in the organization to convince them of the need for change and to make it happen.

Figure 2: Stages of storyselling in organisational coaching

1. Contracting Stage

Organization – coach - coachee

Interaction of organization's, coach's and coachee's stories to negotiate common ground for contract

2. Selection Stage

Organization – coachee - coach

Interaction of organization's, coachee's and coach's stories to establish common story to build coaching relationship

3. Coaching Stage

Coach - coachee

Interaction of coach's and coachee's stories to examine and challenge current stories and write a new one

4. Dissemination Stage

Coachee - organization

Interaction of coachee's and organization's stories to create and enact a new future.

This process of storyselling is essentially about the interaction of stories, which is fruitfully illustrated by Boje's (1995) *Tamara* metaphor. He uses Disney's play *Tamara*, which is enacted simultaneously at different stages, to illustrate how storyteller and audience participate in multiple stories that unfold on different stages simultaneously. Despite its origins in postmodern organization theory, *Tamara* is also a useful metaphor to describe how stories from different domains in a person's life interact and inform their sensemaking. An individual is therefore both a storyteller and a member of the audience. When storytellers and audience come together at a particular stage, they co-create meaning through the interaction of their respective stories, but this interaction does not follow a set script and can break down at any stage. This also implies that the audience can only participate in parts of these stories because they cannot be at different stages at the same time. However, each member of the audience will have a part in a larger on-going story that unfolds on a particular stage at any one time. The coaching relationship is a good example for these complex narrative dynamics. Coach and coachee come together at a particular time and place to critically engage with the management development issue in question. Their stories will interact through questioning and challenging one another, through the introduction of new language and concepts, and sometimes through persuasion and seduction. Both coach and coachee will be influenced by the stories circulating in their wider environment (such as the organizations they participate in), and they will bring these with them to the coaching

relationship. While only participating in storytelling on one stage at a time, both coach and coachee will also engage in a multitude of larger stories unfolding around them, both as shapers and recipients. This complex process is an important part of coaching as a transformative learning experience (Reissner, 2008a, Author 2) aimed to increase knowledge and understanding.

1. Contracting stage

The contract between coach and organization is at the heart of the contracting stage, and much of the interaction between the two parties will be the telling of stories. The organization will tell their story of the management development issue in question to the coach, while the coach will tell (and try to sell) the story of their credentials, reputation and success to the organization in return. In order to negotiate a contract successfully, the organization's and the coach's stories will have to draw on common ground and interact in a way that is meaningful to all parties involved.

This stage is problematic as it is primarily about selling and buying coaching services and setting up a contract, so both parties will have a strong agenda and the need for a clear outcome. We do not suggest that storytelling is necessarily abused in this stage, but there is a great risk of deception and manipulation because the stakes will be high for both coach and organization. As coaching is currently an unregulated profession, it is not always possible for the organization to verify the stories and credentials of the coach. The organization may become entranced by a good story told by the coach without supporting evidence. Similarly, the organization may be telling the story of their needs in a way that distorts the true nature of the situation. For instance, an organization may want to lay off an employee, yet fears court action and redundancy payments. Hiring the services of a coach to 'sort out that individual' may be perceived as a less costly option by the organization and may provide them with a rationale for laying off the employee if the intended outcomes (which are likely to be unrealistic) are not met. Such an agenda is most likely to be hidden during the contracting stage and coaches need to be sensitive to such issues.

There is an added complexity when the coachee gets involved and their story enters the contracting stage as this may differ from the organizational representatives' negotiating the contract with the coach. It is not unusual for the coachee to tell the coach a different story or at least put forward a different slant on the organizational story. For example, a coach is often seen as the instrument in solving perceived performance issues of a potential coachee. The story the

organization may tell is that the potential coachee needs to improve or raise their game. This version of the story might be challenged by the potential coachee who tells of organizational or leadership issues that have a negative impact on their performance and over which they have no or little control. The challenge for the coach is to integrate disparate stories for the purpose of creating a story which can be accepted by all parties at the contracting stage.

Hence, the power dynamics within this stage are manifold: the coach may seek to exert power over the organization, the organization may seek to exert power over the coach, the coach may seek to exert power over the coachee, the organization may seek to exert power over the coachee, and the coachee may seek to exert power over both organization and coach. In addition, the organization may try to devolve responsibility of dealing with an unpleasant situation onto the coach, as highlighted in the above example; in this transaction the power may deliberately shift to the coach together with the responsibility for the outcome. Equally, the coach may manipulate the situation by exercising their power of manipulation and the telling of a compelling story to both organization and coachee, which may exaggerate the outcomes of past coaching assignments and the benefits to the respective organizations in a quest to receive the contract.

2. Selection stage

In many instances, coachees will have to be convinced by the organization, often with the help of the coach, that 1) coaching is the right measure for their further development or that they are the right person to undergo coaching; and 2) a particular coach is the right person for the job. This is problematic because it involves the selling of both the organization's and the coach's stories to the coachee, trying to influence their perception of coaching and the coach in question and ultimately influence their sensemaking and accompanying stories. Power may be played out openly by the organization by highlighting potential repercussions for the coachee if they do not comply or by more subtle manipulation of the coachee's perceptions and behaviours. This is a delicate stage, marked by the various stories that become intertwined, and it is a period of influence, persuasion and bargaining between organization and coachee and one in which often also the coach gets involved. If any one stakeholder is resistant, the others may feel that they have to manipulate and seduce them with their particular story for the purpose of winning them over because the stakes are high for all of them. A collective story has to emerge as a foundation for the coaching relationship, and it may not always be possible to negotiate this.

At this stage the coach may draw on their powers of persuasion as well as their powers of storytelling to convince the coachee of the potential benefits of coaching. Although this can be done with good intentions, it may also be perceived as manipulative by the coachee. A positive use of power may be for the coach to help the client understand the nature of coaching that they would benefit from, overcoming the resistance to coaching that often results from a lack of understanding of what coaching entails. This will make the selection process more transparent to all stakeholders and other organizational actors. A negative use of power may be for the coach to influence the coachee's perceptions of coaching through incorrect or partial information of the potential benefits on their further development with the sole intention of winning the contract. It will be extremely difficult to discern the different uses of power in the relationship between coach, coachee and organization at this point because it is still in the early stages of development.

3. Coaching Stage

The coaching stage is probably the most complex of the four stages as it involves deep interaction of different stories from a wide variety of domains. Both coach and coachee will bring the stories of their experiences and related sensemaking to the coaching setting, and both will be influenced by stories of wider organizational and contextual issues (e.g. management discourse, economic climate). These stories will interact in multiple and complex ways as Boje (1995) has described in the *Tamara* metaphor and as highlighted above. Coach and coachee will exchange their stories of personal experience, question and challenge them in the light of organizational and contextual events, and create new stories that both constitute and reflect any cognitive and emotional changes resulting from this process. These will lead to new meanings, which in turn can be used to enact a new future through new or revised frames of references, understanding and behaviours.

Storytelling is at the heart of this stage as without it and the associated concept of sensemaking coaching would be a meaningless concept. But storytelling has two faces: on the one hand, it is a fundamental means of communication (Allan et al., 2002) and an innocent means to articulate and make sense of personal experience (Reissner, 2008b), to express hopes and fears (Taylor et al., 2002) and to create a new future that can be enacted by the coachee (Reissner, 2008a). It is therefore a fundamental way to bring about cognitive and behavioural change in the coachee as part of a transformational learning process and to develop them both personally and professionally. On the other hand, storytelling may be subject to manipulation and abuse

(Gabriel, 2004; 2008; Lapp and Carr, 2008) by both coach and coachee. For example, the coach may seek to influence the coachee in a particular way so that the outcomes of the coaching contract can be met, and the coachee may seek to influence the coach in a way that makes him/her sympathize with and take sides for the coachee. Neither party may be aware of this as the many stories and relationships that are interconnected at this stage are bound up in complex power dynamics and subject to the influence of the external relationships.

4. Dissemination Stage

The central idea of coaching as defined in this p is to bring about cognitive and behavioural change in the coachee that will lead to change in both the coachee and the client organization. Hence, the new story which the coachee created as part of the coaching process with the help of the coach will have to be disseminated to other organizational actors to inform their sensemaking stories and create a new future based on new cognition and behaviours. The assumption behind this conceptualization of coaching is that the social world of the coachee is continuously constructed, reproduced and transformed through narrative interaction with others. The personal and social world of the client is acknowledged as the basis of the developmental process, and the context in which the coachee operates will be taken into account. The aim is therefore to develop and improve the quality of the stories the coachee engages with in their wider context. The overarching purpose of the coach at this stage is to have equipped the client with the personal power of enacting their future story and for the client to realize the potential they have identified as part of the coaching process. It is the coachee's task to disseminate this story to other organizational actors to bring about change in the organization. This story, which may be heavily influenced by the coach's, the organization's and other stories, can be further distorted by the coachee in the dissemination process to achieve a certain goal among peers and subordinates.

In addition, this is the time for the coach to let go of any (perceived) power they may have had within the coaching relationship. This may be problematic if the coach needs the feeling of power that comes with being needed for their own emotional well-being. The process of closure and separation may be painful and therefore open to the abuse of power for personal gratification. For instance, the coach may find it difficult to bring the coaching appointment to a close and to equip the coachee with the new story they need to enact a new future for themselves and the wider organization. The coaching relationship will not have a clear end and the coachee and organization will need to coach's services for longer than necessary. The developmental goal

of the coaching assignment to enable the coachee to discover new meanings and enact a new future will not have been met in that case, even though this may not be clear to those involved.

Conclusion

Storytelling and storyselling are at the heart of coaching in organizations as they allow for the development of the coachee through new knowledge, understanding and sensemaking while also enabling coach, organization and coachee to assert power in negotiating the coaching contract and relationship. Hence, coaching in organizations is a complex process of different stories interacting with one another at different times and on different stages. At times, this interaction will be an innocent and constructive exchange of personal experience for developmental purposes while at other times, it will be about playing out power dynamics with a clear, manipulative and sometimes even abusive agenda in mind. The challenge for those involved is to identify these different patterns of interaction as well as their motives as the dividing line between them is anything but clear cut. The multitude of coaching approaches and techniques (or the lack of an overriding story of coaching) complicates this process.

The approach to coaching (or coaching story) that the coach will select to facilitate the coaching process will depend on their background, experiences and personal biases. It will also have been underpinned by different assumptions about people and their learning, of how knowledge is acquired and how further enquiries in a given domain of experience can be constructed, offering different definitions of what constitutes coaching (Stewart et al., 2008). There is first and foremost the pragmatic story which argues for the acceptance of whatever practice delivers results with an emphasis on techniques. The pragmatist requires the freedom to blend disparate techniques and approaches together without boundary restrictions. On the other hand there are well established communities of knowledge with clear theoretical and academic identities, which include adult learning, psychology and counselling, and business studies. Kemp (2008) posits that despite the popularity of some coaching models among practitioners, many make erroneous claims of validity based on anecdotal evidence only. He goes on to argue that these claims are for the purpose of practitioners to differentiate themselves in an increasingly crowded marketplace. This adds to the difficulty of both organization and coachee to decide on the validity and ultimately the value of the coaching story they are being sold, limiting their power to choose the right appointment for their needs. What this paper has endeavoured to reveal is the complex nature of the various stories that unfold in the different stages of the organizational coaching process. All parties involved in storytelling need to be mindful of the dynamics of power play

that is inherent within each of the stages. Awareness of these dynamics allows coach, organization and coachee to navigate through these stages for the purpose of achieving the benefit of coaching for all stakeholders.

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ⁱ Drawing on Reissner (2008b), we imply the following distinction between narrative and storytelling in this paper. A story is an account of past and present personal experience, which can have a strong future dimension. Narrative is a larger frame of meaning, in which multiple stories are tied up. For instance, the belief that one is not good at something can be a narrative that influences the person’s life. It is an umbrella for numerous stories about separate experiences that contribute to that narrative and belief (such as bad grades, comments by other people, rejections).